

## Notes about Sophocles *Antigone*, a Greek tragedy:

The drama was rooted in religion NOT entertainment. Performances of Greek tragedy involved a great deal of ritual. Tragic festivals were religious in nature because they were celebrations of the god Dionysus. In fact, the theater was a temple.

Method of production: The plays were put on in the spring for three days. There were five plays per day. Each day was by a different playwright. The best one was awarded first prize—a wreath of ivy.

The style of Greek tragedy was ceremonial. Music played a great part in the performance; however, since none of this music has survived, we cannot be certain what it sounded like. We also cannot be certain how much of the play text was spoken, chanted, or sung, or what kind of movement was used by the chorus.

We do know that the Greek theater allowed for tremendous spectacle, including earthquakes, avalanches, and gods descending from the sky. Masks and colorful costumes were worn by the performers. Without a doubt, performances were vivid and very exciting.

Usually, Greek plays open with a **prologue**, a scene that introduces the conflict of the play. Sophocles' contemporaries often included a monologue in which a character delivers the necessary background directly to the audience.

The prologue is followed by the **parados**, or the entrance of the chorus. The parados is an example of a **choral ode**. These odes supply exposition, comment on action, and contribute to thematic development. Odes also can suggest the passage of time. For example, the final ode in *Antigone* gives Creon time to bury Polynices' body, and witness his son's suicide.

Following the parados, scenes alternate with odes throughout the play. Action culminates in the **exodos**, or final scene.

The chorus is not an uninvolved group in Sophocles' plays. The group often interacts with principal characters, engaging in dialogue. The **choragos**, or chorus leader often speaks for the entire chorus in these moments.

In Sophocles' plays, these devices meld into a compact drama. The action is usually limited to one setting and to a single day. There are few digressions; the play moves swiftly and directly, and the plot is often compressed. Sophocles' economy can be seen in *Antigone*. Even before Creon's edict concerning Polynices' burial is made public, *Antigone* has disobeyed it.

Partly as a result for this compression, **offstage action** is very important in Greek tragedy. For example, the Greeks made no attempts to portray violence onstage. Consequently, the messenger becomes an important figure in Sophocles' plays and

those of other Greek playwrights. The messenger acts as a traditional figure of exposition-the witness who comes to tell others of events that have transpired elsewhere.

## **Physical appearance of arena:**

The arena would seat 15,000 to 20,000 spectators. The actors wore large masks and high boots so they could be seen.

## **Greek belief on burial:**

An unburied body meant the soul would be eternally tormented. The soul would be in unrest and could not enter Hades.

## **Legend of Oedipus:**

In mythology, gods are capable of inflicting evil and good. They controlled man's fate. If a person had problems, it was assumed he or she was on the bad side of the gods.

Oedipus is referred to throughout *Antigone*, and an understanding of his story is essential to an understanding of the play.

Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes. An oracle predicted that the son was fated to murder his father. Therefore, Laius abandoned his infant son on Mount Cithaeron. But a shepherd discovered the boy and took the child to Corinth. There the baby was adopted by Polybus, king of the city.

When Oedipus reached manhood, he heard a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Believing Polybus to be his real father and hoping to avoid that fate, Oedipus fled Corinth. On the road, he met with King Laius. The two men, not knowing one another's true identities, quarreled. Oedipus killed Laius in the fight.

Oedipus arrived in Thebes to find the city under the curse of a riddling sphinx. Creon, who had assumed leadership of Thebes, proclaimed that he would give the throne to one who could save the city. Oedipus answered the riddle and, as a result, was made king. The prophecy he had feared was unwittingly fulfilled when he took Jocasta (Creon's sister) as his wife. The couple had four children: Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene.

A terrible plague and drought came over Thebes. The oracle foretold that the city would continue to be ravaged until the killer of Laius was found and punished. Oedipus relentlessly pursued Laius' killer until he ultimately discovered the murderer to be himself. A messenger announcing Polybus' death and telling Oedipus that he

had been adopted confirmed his worst fears: he had killed his father and married his mother. Jocasta, realizing the truth before Oedipus, took her own life.

A man of courage and determination, Oedipus took his punishment into his own hands. He blinded himself, turned power over to Creon, and went into exile.

After years of wandering in exile with Antigone, Oedipus arrived at a grove in Colonus, a village near Athens. In the meantime, an agreement between Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polynices, to alternately rule Thebes fell apart. Eteocles refused to give up the throne. Polynices retaliated by gathering an army to attack Thebes.

Then the brothers heard of a prophecy that promised victory in battle to the city in which Oedipus died. Suddenly the aged pariah had become of great value to any city which proved his final resting place.

Polynices and Creon both came to Colonus to take Oedipus away, but he chose to stay. He also cursed both his sons, predicting that they would die at each other's hands. Finally, the gods themselves summoned Oedipus to his mysterious death, delivering him from his suffering.

Polynices, with six others, attempted to invade Thebes. The seven men led attacks against the seven gates of Thebes. Eteocles defended the gate assaulted by Polynices. As Oedipus predicted, the two brothers died at each other's hands. The Theban army beat back the invaders and Creon assumed power. At this point, the story of Antigone begins.

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